



***Comment***

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# **General Elections in Pakistan 2013: Some Reflections**

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On May 11, 2013, Pakistan went to the ballot box. In general, the Pakistani people and the latest caretaker government in Islamabad can be congratulated for two things. First, the election commission was able to pull-off the tremendous task off carrying out General Elections. Second, for the remarkable voter turnout of around 60%! Large shares of the Pakistani people defied the risks of going to the polling stations – this is a clear indication that the Pakistani people fully appreciated the importance of these elections and wanted to have their vote cast. The fact that several hundreds of people lost their lives or were injured in insurgent attacks during the election period underscores the extraordinarily threatening situation of exercising their democratic right of taking part in the country's politics. These two big achievements have made the 2013 elections one of the most important events in the recent political history of the country.

However, the elections are also remarkable regarding the actual outcomes and their implications for democracy, peace and stability in Pakistan and beyond. If one believes the domestic media, the country was very close to a major shift in the political landscape, especially regarding a potential transition in the political leadership was persistently evoked. This found its most visible expression in the media's hyping of Imran Khan and his political party Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI). Being able to stage gatherings with more than 100.000 spectators during his electoral campaigning, especially in

order to attract the new and urbanized youth, most of the press did not miss the opportunity to pick up Khan's buzzword of creating a 'political Tsunami' which would lead to new faces and fresh impetus in Pakistan's politics. But it appears that there was no such landslide transformation, at least not easily recognizable at the first sight. Khans and his PTI made a lot of social and political noise and found the traction they wanted within the elections' coverage. Nevertheless, since the elections are over now and daily life has returned to the realities on the ground one can't help but feel that much of this Imran Khan hype found its roots in wishful thinking. This is even more significant after acknowledging that his "dream of change" was not shared by the general public. It was more about the hopes of a part of the country's urban and educated youth, which of course is an important and influential section, but not one that can single-handedly change the outcomes of the elections. It goes without a doubt that many representatives of the modern English-speaking- media jeopardized their objectivity by losing the appropriate and professional distance to Imran Khan and his party. Perhaps this was partly encouraged by foreign media, which was also affected by the 'Imran Khan fever', as well as Pakistani journalists, who overestimated Khan's capabilities to induce change. There is no doubt that his chances to gain power in Islamabad and the provinces were blown out of proportion. The results of the elections crushed this (dis)illusion.

Khan neither turned into the strongest political force on the national level, nor was he able to play an important role as a junior partner or a 'kingmaker'. He was also not able to win an absolute majority in the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province (KPK) and he suffered a defeat in Lahore, which was especially painful since Khan was hoping to turn this urban centre into his stronghold. Lahore was also supposed to send a signal towards his major political rival on the ballot boxes Nawaz Sharif and his PML-N.

Because of the 'Imran Khan fever' many Pakistani's and especially the international observers started to see him as the next Prime Minister. Therefore, the election results were interpreted as a defeat of Khan and his PTI. However, in this context one clearly has to state that it is a total distortion of facts if one speaks about a defeat. The fact that Khan was only able to win one seat in 2002 and the PTI was not represented in the 13th National Assembly (2008-2013) and now won 35 seats is a remarkable success. If he is now able to form a successful coalition in KPK under his leadership he can use that province as a model and prove that he is really able to deliver, and is not just a product of the media. In fact, relatively speaking the PTI was the biggest winner of the 2013 election. Whereas the PML-N more than doubled its representation in the National Assembly, the PTI went from 0 in the 2008 Elections to 35 seats in the most recent one.

Regardless, at the end of the day following assessment can be made: after a more critical analysis of Khan's electoral promises and political statements one must recognize that there is no big difference between Khan and the 'condemned' old political establishment. An impression which found its resonance within the electorate which was not persuaded by the surreal sounding pledge of eliminating corruption within 90 days, or creating jobs for the huge masses of unemployed youth. Though the issues of drone attacks and Pakistan's relationship with the USA are perceived as important, it turned out that they reflected concerns of people in certain regions of the country more than those of the Pakistani public at large. Besides the people in the respective areas which are affected by drone attacks - and in which PTI was relatively successful, the masses are more interested in socio-economic issues of daily life. In this context, one should mention that it was helpful that the US tried to be as 'invisible' as possible and restrained itself from siding with a certain political party. An example for this strategy is that US Secretary of State John Kerry skipped a visit to Pakistan in March to avoid accusations of any involvement in the upcoming elections.

However, the good performances of regional parties promoting local issues made clear that compared with 2008, this year's elections were not influenced by emotional voting behaviour and most Pakistanis made their decision based on rational indicators. Obviously Pakistani voters are keen to be governed by a government which is finally able to deal with Pakistan's domestic problems on the ground instead of getting distracted by 'high politics' dealing with the so-called national concerns as defined by the military's security paradigm.

Having this in mind, the most remarkable outcome of the elections was the political return and the outstanding victory of Nawaz Sharif and his PML-N. However, it did not really come as a surprise. Generally one can state that his campaign was a smart combination of several factors:

First, the drawing on the record of the PML-N's comparably good governance in Punjab, which was actually an achievement of Nawaz's brother Shahbaz Sharif, Chief Minister in Pakistan's largest and dominating province.

Second, a professional campaign with a successful use of the 'political coalition opportunities' offered by the country's political system especially its electoral system 'The-First-Past-The-Post'. Here one has to state that due to a detailed analysis of potential 'eligible candidates', meaning the identification of people with the highest

chances to win their constituency, and the ability to get their support (partly through party defection), Nawaz was able to secure many seats. Initially it seemed that Imran Khan seemed to have substantial success in coaxing eligible candidates from PML-N camp to join the PTI. However, in the end Nawaz managed to prevent this process and consolidated their allegiance to the PML-N.

Third, Nawaz focused strictly on economic themes or on topics related to improving the socio-economic conditions of the Pakistani people. He was able to present himself during the electoral campaign as a politician who was not solely representing the interest of the establishment, especially his own. Subsequently, he was able to achieve an inroad into the broader, economically less fortunate sections of the Pakistani society. In this direction, it appeared that Khan was perceived by the common Pakistani on the country side as too aloof and most likely politically as too new and inexperienced. The masses once again chose an old and known force and were not interested in a political adventure promising ground breaking changes but not offering clear ideas on how they would be implemented.

Last but not least Nawaz Sharif was able to convince Pakistani voters that he changed fundamentally. He managed to persuade the public that he would act more responsibly and professionally than he did in the 1990s where he displayed severe autocratic tendencies which often resulted in conflict with all other

noteworthy political forces. In brief he managed to transform himself from an exiled “persona non grata” into an ‘eligible person’ able to win a clear majority on the national level.

However, Nawaz must now show that he can deliver. He might have learned his lessons from his first two failed attempts to tackle the problems of Pakistan. It seems that the resistance against any autocratic rule, military or civilian, is increasing. Nawaz might be able to get along this time with the army which will continue to have a stake in all important decision-making processes. It will most likely be helpful to Nawaz Sharif to coin the rapprochement with India as the major theme in his foreign policy. A direction which is also in line with the army’s top brass which realized that they don’t necessarily have to be friends with India but have to normalize their relationship in order to boost the country’s trade and economy. But even more than the argument of the power of the purse seems the increasing conviction that Pakistan’s armed forces are not able to deal with the double burden of competing with India at its border (in maintaining high troop levels there) and at the same time struggling with the Taliban in its border region to Afghanistan. Besides the fact that Nawaz Sharif signalled that he is willing to talk with the Taliban, the military is keen to continue its struggle. This will most likely be the first litmus test for the new government in its relationship with the army. When it comes to Afghanistan, at least during the electoral campaign it seemed that

Nawaz is quite ambivalent in this direction. He will most likely follow the line of the army and will not be very interested in getting too involved in this conundrum.

Talking about the potential relations of the next government with the other branches of state and agencies, one should not leave out Pakistan’s increasingly independent and sometimes stubborn judiciary. At the moment it appears that Sharif will most likely not get in trouble with the country’s leading judges. Since current chief justice Iftikhar Muhammad Chaudhry will retire this year and the next most senior judges are also close to the retirement age, this might be an indication for the reluctance within the judiciary to continue its confrontation with the executive, at least in the next one and a half years. Furthermore, it might also be possible that the judiciary and the new government under Nawaz Sharif are on the same page regarding critical issues. They will share the same antipathy towards Pervez Musharraf who is or will soon face several charges. Nawaz Sharif will obviously not share the sympathies of the military towards its former Chief of Army Staff. Additionally, and more importantly, they will share the same view towards religious extremists.

Nevertheless, even Nawaz Sharif strictly follows his business mantra and continues to maintain a soft approach towards the Taliban in order to prevent provoking them. These fundamentalists will remain the greatest threat for any peaceful, stable and democratic future. Undoubtedly, the election-related violence caused by the Taliban was one of the major challenges during the last weeks of campaigning as well as on the actual day of casting the ballots. Since it hampered the active right to vote, the passive suffrage (standing up in the elections as a candidate), as well as freedom of speech and opinion since especially secular politicians, their political parties and supporters were in the focus of the fundamentalists, Taliban activities led to serious defects in Pakistan's emerging democracy. In this context one clearly has to state the fact that Nawaz Sharif and Imran Khan were largely spared from terrorist attacks, creates the false impression that there is room to manoeuvre for Pakistan's political forces in dealing with the Taliban.

Actually, the Taliban's strategy is pretty simple and crystal clear: to reject of any kind of democratic governance because it is perceived as an adversary to the basic precepts of Islam and in contrast with Sharia law. Therefore, since the democratic path is no option for the Taliban the pseudo distinction between the good and bad Taliban remains pointless. There is only one type of Taliban, deeply anti-systemic and anti-democratic in nature as well as fundamentally against the constitution of Pakistan.

Furthermore, it does not look like the Taliban have any interest in negotiations with a Pakistani government. Therefore, in order to improve the quality of democracy in Pakistan as well as to create stability in the country, not only social and economic prosperity is paramount, but also a robust approach against the Taliban is needed.